



## Chapter 6

# A SIDE TRIP TO WINDBER 1899

Much of this story takes place in the Pennsylvanian town of Windber. Sol Roach lived and worked there for nearly half of his life. He came to Windber in 1898 when it was first being built and was one of the first businessmen to erect a structure on the main commercial street, Graham Ave. Windber was a phenomenon of the industrial age and was a unique place. It was a coal company town and its name was an anagram of the name Berwind (Windber), Berwind being the name of one of the partners in the Berwind White Coal Company. Rather than try to explain it I will rely on an eyewitness from 1899. The following is an article from the June 4, 1899 **Philadelphia Times** by an unnamed author. His description would be welcomed by any Chamber of Commerce!

## **A SIDE TRIP TO WINDBER**

**TOWN NOT LOCATED ON THE MAP THAT COMES TO STAY  
NEW COAL MINES WORK MAGIC**

**Wonderful Results Follow Opening of 30,000-Acre Coal Tract- Forest to Village of 5,000 Souls in Eighteen Months- Churches, Six Hotels, Theaters, Department Stores, Six Million Gallon Reservoir- Liberal Inducement to Investors- Highest Wages to Miners- Western Development Outdone**

During the writer's stay in Johnstown many were the wonderful stories told of the new town of Windber, seven miles away to the South, up among the green timber-covered hills that form the stepping stones to the Allegheny Mountains. The tales of the vast and valuable coal deposits there, of their development, of the felling of acres of trees and the blasting out of thousands of stumps, of the building of houses and grading of streets, and the construction of reservoirs, and the erection of hotels, and electric plants and stores and churches, were oft repeated and enlarged upon, until my excited curiosity burst its bounds and I went to Windber.

I went to Windber by the pike road from Johnstown, preferring to drive than go by rail, for be it known that a carriage ride over the hills and through the valleys in all directions in this part of the country is a luxury that the true lovers of the picturesque can never get enough of. Nature has not only deposited her stock of dusky minerals within the depths of these mountain chains with prodigality, but she has been equally

extravagant in the wealth of the panoramic splendors with which she decks the storehouse of her gifts to man.

There are many fine farms in this neighborhoods, some of them I must admit being somewhat angular and slanting, but the area of level farming land hereabouts is very extensive. At this time of year, when the fruit trees are in bloom and the air laden with sweet smells, a drive from Johnstown to Windber is an experience that will linger among one's recollections of pleasant happening.

Half a mile this side of Windber is the little agricultural village of Scalp Level. I have tried hard to discover the origin of this hamlet's name, but without success. I can account for it only on the ground of a once-upon-a-time tribe of Indians in that locality who were very particular to do their scalping "on the square."

Just after Scalp Level is left behind the first glimpse of Windber obtained. A few minutes later and I am in the busiest place, probably, that can be found within the boundry lines of the State f Pennsylvania. The stories of Windber that are passing current in Johnstown don't begin to fill the bill or convey the correct idea of what is to be seen here. Similar scenes to what can be witnessed at Windber today have doubtless been duplicated many times in the Far West, but I doubt if even anything like what is going on here ever had its counterpart in the Eastern States. Eighteen months ago this place was mainly forest of hemlock trees. There was one large farm, one farmhouse and a barn. Today there is a village of upwards of four thousand souls. Since November

1897, when the work of clearing began, the tranquility of Scalp Level has been disturbed, and for eighteen months past the roads leading to that hitherto quiet country town have been crowded with teams hauling machinery and goods to the new coal fields. Everything is push and hurry and all of the people seem to be imbued with the idea that a new era has already dawned, and that in the near future Windber will be the most densely populated and liveliest business place in Somerset county.

Today a hundred teams and an army of laborers are employed in building long broad streets which are already lined with houses. Many of the dwellings are large and attractive and modern architectural design. A beautiful clubhouse has been built at the cost of \$5000 and it is said to be one of the prettiest structures in Western Pennsylvania. The main thoroughfare is Graham Avenue, sixty feet wide with a solid roadway. There are several churches, six hotels, some of the latter being quite pretentious both as regards size, architecture and interior fittings and furnishings, while the business section contains several blocks of stores covering all lines of trade. The large department store of the Eureka Supply Company was thrown open to the public on the day of my visit to

the town. I attended the "opening". In the center of the first floor of the big establishment, on a raised platform, a local orchestra was dispensing the latest airs and flowering plants were in profusion to grace the important occasion. The Eureka Supply Company is early in the field to give the citizens of the newly budded town the luxury of a finely arranged, well-stocked department store. It is fitted with all the conveniences, including an elevator, and its departments embrace all the lines of necessities in common with department stores everywhere, including a meat market. The stores throughout the town all seemed to be doing a thriving business. Indeed, there is not an idler in Windber. Hustle and bustle is everywhere; the road makers' mallets and the carpenters' hammers and the puffing steam from the power plants at the nearby mines spread the contagion of activity even to the air. And when I speak of the mines I name the cause of all these busy scenes.

The coal that underlies Somerset and Cambria counties forms one of the richest steam-making coal deposits in the county. It has been estimated that those two counties contain millions upon millions of tons, sufficient to give constant employment to thousands of men for more than a hundred years. It is difficult to arrive at a proper comprehension of the magnitude and commercial value of the vast beds of bituminous coal buried in the bowels of this picturesque cluster of mountains and hills. For centuries these mines and acres upon acres of fuel have been waiting for the hand of man to rend them from their hiding place. There are 30,000 acres of coal lands in this Scalp Level district. It took years of patient labor and doubtless some considerable hardship was intermingled with it, to locate and map out this great area of coal laden territory.

Something like eight years were required to accomplish the great undertaking, but a year and a half ago all the pioneering of advance labor was finished and the whole of the 30,000 acre tract at that time became the sole possession of the Windber Coal Company.

Think for a moment of 30,000 acres of coal lands in one tract. To give one a definite idea of what it means I will draw a line around the boundaries of this great coal field. Start at Geistown; follow thence to Salix along the Baltimore and Ohio and the Stoneycreek to Dull Station; thence to Buckstown, following the coal outcroppings along the Alleghenies as far as coal runs; thence along a 6,000 acre lumber tract in Paint and Richland townships; thence along Roaring Fork, thence following Big Paint Creek and its branches up to Bedford pike; thence around six great farms to Geistown, the place of the beginning. When you have accomplished this you have described a circle of over 60 miles,

and in that circle are the 30,000 acres of coal lands belonging to the Wilmore Company. This company purchased this vast tract for a purpose and that purpose was to get the coal out and ship it to the markets and commercial centers of the world. To do that they must have a basis of operation- a central point from which to send the product. After the most exhaustive examination of the topography of the lands lying in the 60 mile circle described Chief Engineer Cunningham and his assistants determined that the natural and the most practical and economical point at which to begin operations was in the valley below the famous little town of Scalp Level, and there the town of Windber has already sprung up and here will be reared a city that will before many years be the center of one of the most important coal industries in the great State of Pennsylvania.

And not only is Windber destined to take the highest rank as a center for the production of coal, but it is also certain, judging from many facts of the most substantial nature, to attain a population within the next three or four years of from 7,000 to 10,000, possibly more. From now on a city will grow here as if by magic. The beginning has been made and nothing can stop it. There will be something to encourage growth, for the Wilmore Coal Company has not invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in mineral rights and in great permanent improvements in the rich mountain region merely for the sake of keeping money in circulation. They must reimburse themselves for the enormous outlay of capital, and the way in which they propose to do it they are already showing in the extensive outlay of capital, and the way in which they propose to do it they are already showing in the extensive preparations they are making to bring forth the enormous wealth that lies buried beneath the great mountains of the Allegheny. True, they might get their money back and an enormous profit besides by disposing of their best interests to other great capitalists, but even in the event of a transaction of this nature, which is not remotely probable, the fact would still remain that Windber would continue to grow and continue to develop as one of the most important coal mining centers in the country. The money in any event has been invested there and development is inevitable- it is absolutely necessary, else the fabulous sums involved in the transactions there will lie dormant. All the forms of logic points unerringly to the fact that an enormous business must be carried forward at Windber, and all indices of reason lead unmistakable to the conclusion that Windber must in the very near future become an important factor in the industrial world.

The new town of Windber is located south-east of Scalp Level, beginning at a point about 1.200 yards from the village and extending possibly a mile in that direction. The side selected for the town is a beautiful one, lying on a hill gently rising from the bank of Paint Creek to the crest of

the hill a half-mile to the north. The site, which was overgrown with virgin forests a few months ago, is now teeming with life and energy.

The main site of Windber is to be sold and here people employed by the company and those who may still wish to locate in the new town for business reasons will rear their homes and business houses. The company has reserved another spot for its own building, very convenient, however, to the main side of Windber. Here double houses have been built. They are the finest houses ever erected by a coal mining community for employees. They are not shacks. They are erected substantially and are arranged for comfort.

Over two hundred houses are now in process of construction by the company, besides some fifty more which are being built by private individuals. There are also hundreds of people working to get grounds in order on which to build homes and business houses. Scores of men are employed laying foundations for sidewalks, putting in sewers and clearing away the rough places, while other men and teams are busy making excavations preparatory to laying foundations for homes. As to there the hotels, stores and businesses structures that are going up, and there is every reason in the world for the stranger to at first fancy himself viewing the growth of a boom town in the State of Washington rather than being an eyewitness to the healthy development of a substantial industrial community in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

The Pennsylvania Railroad Company has manifested its abiding faith in the new industrial center by building a branch railroad from South Fork to Windber. This branch was built at great expense. It traverses a mountainous country and the engineers experienced considerable difficulty in running a line, but finally overcame the many obstacles. The road bed, however, is one of the best in the state, the structural work is of steel, iron and stone, and everything in the construction of the line shows that the Pennsylvania Railroad people had in view permanent operations and a steadily increasing business. It is no mere switch that has been built- it is a railroad in every sense of the word. There are six miles of branch roads in Windber already. A splendid passenger depot has been erected near the clubhouse spoken of above.

The thoroughness with which the Wilmore Coal Company is going about its work of building a town that shall endure and in which the dwellers shall have their interests and comforts properly cared for, and even anticipated, may be cited in referring to the attention which has been given thus early in the embryo city's career to water supply for Windber. Four miles higher up in the mountains this company has constructed a masonry reservoir, having a capacity of 6,000,000 gallons. The source of supply will give consumers the finest sparkling spring water in the whole

range of the Alleghenies. Fifty thousand dollars were expended on this reservoir, which has a larger supply source, by the way, than the reservoir at Altoona.

All of these mineral lands are owned by Wilmore Coal Company and are operated by; the Berwind-White Coal Company, of Philadelphia. There are already six mines in operation, with thirteen opening, and two more mines will be opened this summer.

The entrances to the mines are the finest the writer ever saw. They are of arched stone and give evidence of the fact that the Berwind-White Coal Company have built them with great care and expense, not only for present convenience, but for future uses. It show that the company means to operate on an extensive scale and that its plans are to go on in its operations for many years to come.

Nearby one of the scenes of building activity in the miner's quarters are the powerhouse, the boiler house, the coal tipple, the openings, the nine fan, the mine superintendent's office and other company buildings for Eureka no. 30 mine. The powerhouse is a structure 46x72 feet in size, equipped with three 250- horsepower each. Everything in connection with haulage is operated by electricity. The coal tipple is built on the most modern principle, with automatic dumps. It has a capacity of dumping five cars of coal every minute, or 300 tons an hour,

The coal mining machines are operated by compressed air, by several of the largest sized Ingersol I-Sargeant air compressors. The Berwind-White Company has 1,400 men now employed in these mines, and 1,400 miners mean, if they mean anything, a population before the end of the year of over 7,000 for the new town. In another year or so several more mines will be opened, and this means more work for miners and a still larger population for Windber. Anxious to consult the comfort of men who work in its great mines, the company has erected a \$5,000 Cappell fan on a great foundation of stone near the mouth of each mine. Each fan is capable of producing 300,000 cubic feet of air a minute and has a capacity of 250- horsepower air pressure.

The average daily output of the mines now is 6,000 tons, which means 250 carloads of coal. With the opening of new mines, contemplated within the next tow or three years, the Berwind-White people will be taking out of the Wilmore Company's mines the enormous quantity for 12,000 tons of coal, or 500 carloads, equivalent to a train about three miles long, just double the daily product at the present.

The coal which is being mined here comes from the very heart of the steam-making coal region of the State. It is the fuel used on nearly all of

the ocean-going steamships. In operating the mines the equipment consists of all of the latest improvement in the mechanical appliances especially designed for the purpose of mining. All of the mining is done by machinery operated by compressed air.

The miners employed by Berwind-White Coal Company are paid higher wages, I am told, than are paid at any of the other mining plants in the country. Many of the miners here are earning as high as one hundred dollars per month. The high wages and up-to-date methods in force for getting out the coal, the neat pretty and commodious homes which have been erected for the miner to live in, the advantages to be enjoyed in dwelling in a town like Windber, all tend to make the lot of the men employed in these mines far superior to anything here-to-fore experienced by those who are engaged in the line of work. The houses which the Wilmore Coal Company are building are either rented at a very low figure to the miners, or sold to them at a price, I believe, of something like four hundred dollars to six hundred, according to size and location, for which they pay a small amount per month. Very many of the 1,400 miners now here own their houses, and of the two hundred buildings now being constructed many have already been spoken for.

The payment for these homes is made so easy for the men and the absolute certainty of the increase in valuation during the next few years, has inspired an ambition among them to take advantage of the present opportunity to become property owners. The result of this condition of things is that the industrial portion of Windber's population is by all odds the most thrifty, contented and happy set of people to be found anywhere throughout the coal regions. Then again, the knowledge of the permanency of this great enterprise, which is a guarantee to the miner that his work will be steady and constant, coupled with the high wages paid, makes Windber a veritable Mecca for him, and to get employment in these mines is now his greatest desire. I understand that some 500 more men are to be put on shortly.

It is the permanency of the great undertakings inaugurated by the Wilmore and Berwind-White people at Windber that has caused the town to develop so rapidly. I have gone into details rather more fully than I otherwise might do, for the purpose of showing the stability of the enterprise and the real merit and value in the remarkable and wonderful changes that have taken place in this heretofore peaceful and quiet country district. Until eighteen months ago, when the woodman's axe and the buzzing of the portable saw mills were first heard in what is now a busy little city, I will venture to say the surrounding hills never echoed anything louder than the occasional crack of the hunter's rifle. The transformation is something unusual in a staid old Eastern State, whose industrial centers have taken their time in growing up and rather pride

themselves on their age and the years behind them. The magic wand of enterprise touched the inexhaustible coal fields of Scalp Level Valley, and the result is- Windber. To say it is a “boom” town is not the correct expression, and I wish there was another word by which I could convey the right idea of what the place is like at this time. Unlike some of the boom towns of the wild and wooly West, Windber has a solid foundation to stand on and nothing can stop its growth. Men with long heads, who know the true condition of affairs in this section are investing their money in Windber lots and they; are bound to reap their reward. The liberal terms extended by the Wilmore Coal Company, to whom all the credit for this great development work is due, extend equally attractive arrangements to these who desire to purchase single building plots on time, and many small holders of property here will also turn a pretty profit whenever they wish to sell. Merchants are establishing branches in the town and are benefiting by the business done with the rapidly increasing community. Several lumber industries are already located and working to full capacity. Windber is a promising place for almost any kind of enterprise.

As the town has been laid out with special reference to making it an ideal place for the business men and those who desire comfortable, healthful homes, where there is an ample water supply, good drainage, wide streets, and surroundings entrancing, weird and novel scenery such as artists rave over, there is nothing to be wondered at in the fact that instead of being a coal town, pure and simple, Windber is developing into one of the most attractive residential localities in this part of the country.

The Johnstown and Somerset Traction Company, of which Mr. Morris L Woolf is president, will shortly begin the construction of an electric railway to Windber, which will place the little city and Johnstown about thirty minutes apart.





The parade is heading east on Graham Ave. and is passing the 1200 block.



An early view looking west on Somerset Ave.



**An early view probably down Somerset Ave.**



**Buildings along the west end of the midway district with 13<sup>th</sup> Street at the left side.**



Looking west down Graham Ave. from 15<sup>th</sup> Street through what is called the Midway district. The picture was probably taken from the tower of the old City Hall around 1912.



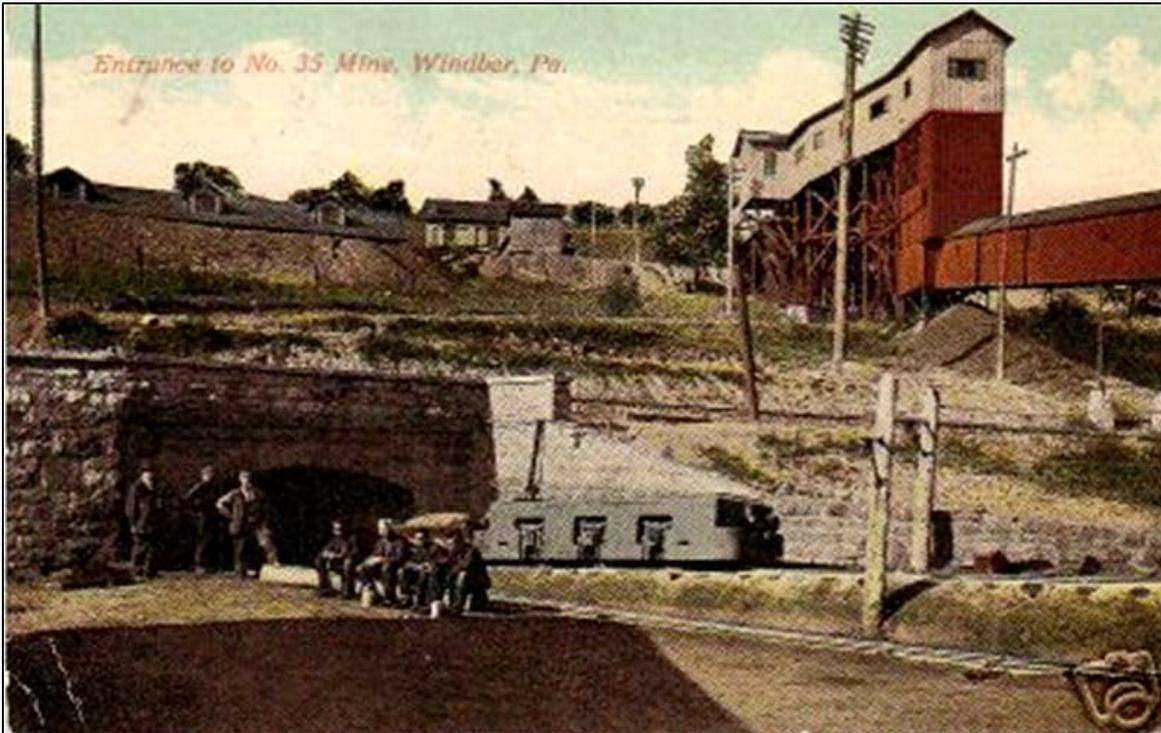
The south side of Graham Ave. looking west. The sixth building from the left is 1428 Graham which became Roxey Roach's Bowling and Billiards.



**Another shot of the south side of Graham Ave. at a later date. Roxey Roach's building is the fourth building from the left in this photo.**



**An early view of the Windber Hospital which was located between 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Streets and Somerset Ave. The hospital included a nurses training facility.**



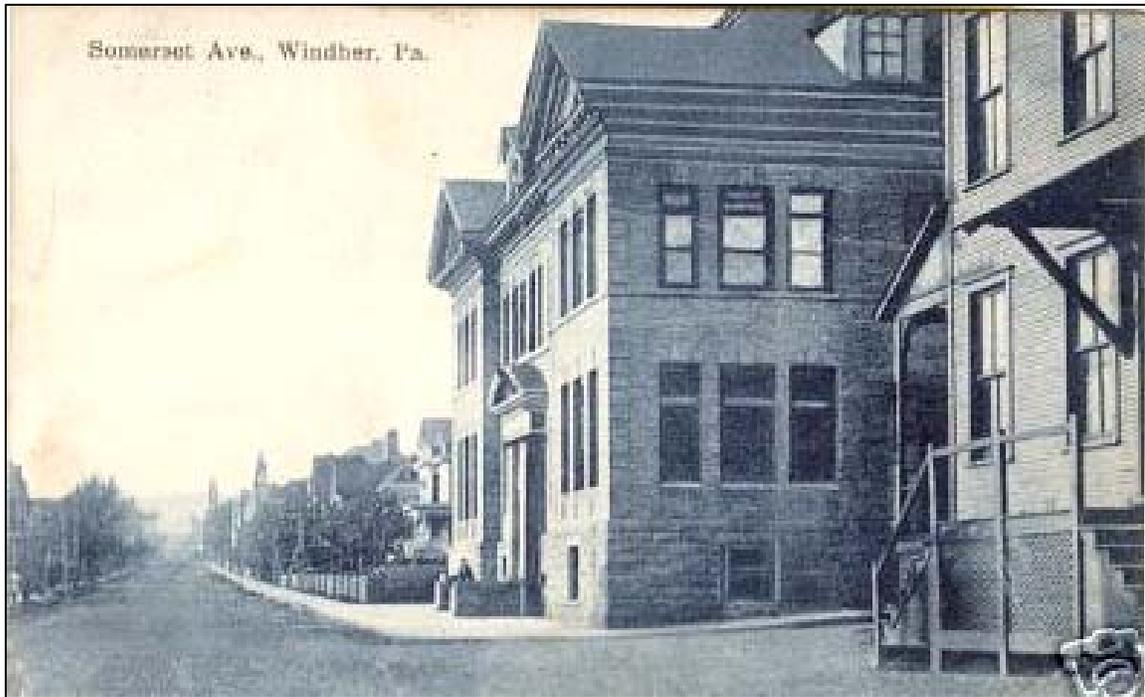
Entrance to Mine 35. This mine operated for 62 years, from 1898-1959. Tonnage of coal removed from this mine alone was 24,975,367 tons. Mine 35 was located along Railroad Street about one mile from the intersection of Somerset Ave. and 17<sup>th</sup> Street.



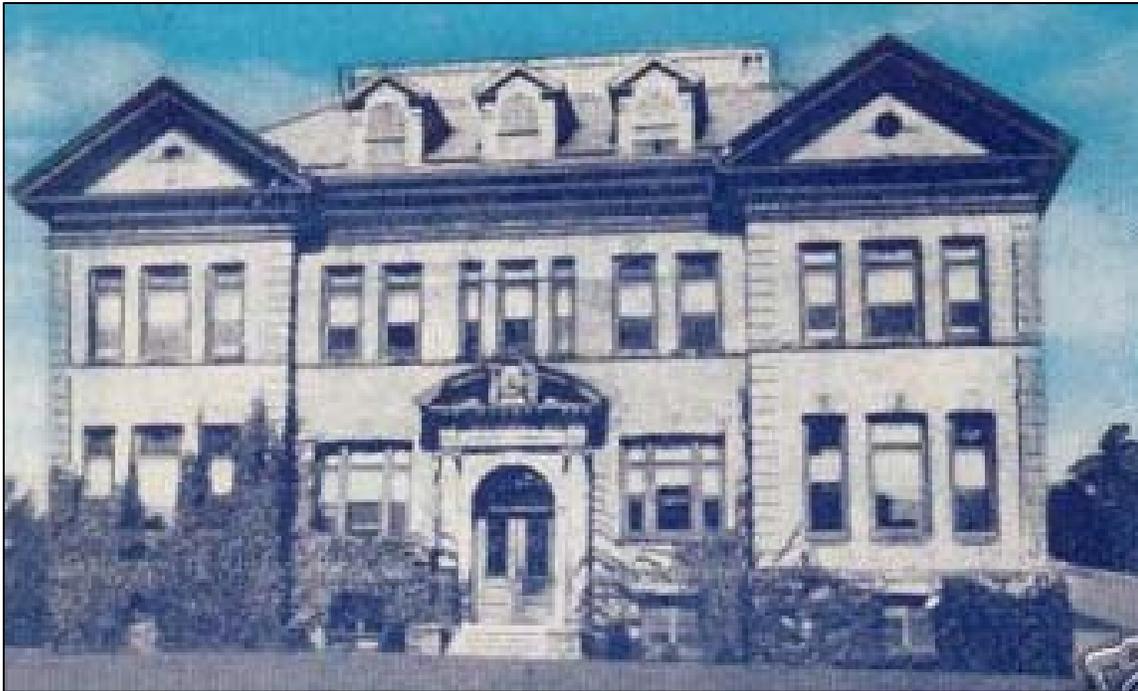
Graham Ave. looking east from 10<sup>th</sup> Street. Sol's house can be seen directly behind the second telephone pole from the left.



**Fifteenth Street looking north from Graham Ave. This is what you would have seen coming out of Roxey's Roach's bowling establishment at 1428 Graham.**



**Looking west on Somerset Ave at 15<sup>th</sup> Street. The stone building is the Berwind White Coal Company offices. This building currently houses the Windber City Hall.**



Another view of the Berwind White Coal Company offices at Somerset and 15<sup>th</sup> Street.



The Palace Hotel on the south east corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and Graham. The car is traveling west on Graham Ave.



**The new Windber High School on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street built in 1924.**



**The old Windber High School on Somerset Ave. looking East.**



Another view of the old Windber High School looking northwest.



The first building of the Presbyterian Church in Windber on Somerset Ave. Margaret and Gertrude Roach are listed as charter member of the church in 1899. The church built a new facility in 1924 at 1101 Somerset, one block north of the Roach home.



**A late 1920's or early 1930's view east down Graham Ave. from approximately 13<sup>th</sup> Street. The Palace Hotel is behind the far right flagpole. The City Hall bears the left flagpole and to its left the Wilmore Coal Co. offices on the upper floor and the post office on the lower. It is now the Coal Heritage Museum.**